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ABSTRACT

Noting that little research has addressed the question of violence in commercials directed to children, a study examined commercials aired during the 21 top-rated children's cartoons during one broadcast week in late spring 1993. Commercials were analyzed for violent content, gender of primary actors and recipients of violent action, primary persuasive theme or appeal, sex and age of primary audience of the commercial, type of product, visual format, and setting of the commercial. Results indicated that violence is an established and well represented characteristic of commercials directed to children. In addition, the violence displayed is clearly associated with being male, reinforcing the male stereotype that to be male is to be violent. Television is a powerful teaching tool, and the results of this study show that boys are being socialized to be violent, at least by television ads. (Contains 34 references, 1 figure of data, and 6 notes.) (Author/RS)

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Selling Violence:

Television Commercials Targeted to Children

by

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Abstract

While a great deal of attention has been paid to the amount of violence portrayed in children's programming very little research has addressed the question of violence in commercials aired that are directed to children. This study examined commercials aired during the twenty-one top rated children's cartoons during one broadcast week in late spring 1993. Commercials were analyzed for violent content, gender of primary actors and recipients of violent action, primary persuasive theme or appeal, sex and age of primary audience of the commercial, type of product, visual format, and setting of commercial. Results indicated that violence is an established and well-represented characteristic of commercials directed to children. In addition, the violence displayed is clearly associated with being male, reinforcing the male stereotype that to be male one must be violent.

Selling Violence:
Television Commercials Targeted to Children

Introduction

It has been said that television is "the first mass-produced and organically composed symbolic environment into which all children are born and in which they will live from cradle to grave" (Palmer & Dorr, 1980). Despite the controversies about the exact nature of its influence, television unquestionably informs and persuades audiences in powerful ways.

Not surprisingly, the amount of television viewed by the average American has been increasing since its inception (Bretl & Cantor, 1988; Murray, 1992). Currently, 98% of all households in the United States have a television (Murray, 1993). Recent research has shown that the average American child watches 27.3 hours of TV per week. By the time the American child has completed high school, it has been estimated that he or she will have watched 22,000 hours of television, 11,000 hours more than he or she will have spent in classrooms (Phillips, 1991).

The overwhelming popularity of television has inspired thousands of investigations into the nature of the medium, from analyses of program content to the impact of heavy television viewing on health and nutrition (Huston, et al., 1992). Concern over the possibility that popular media will inspire anti-social acts has been the focus of much of the research, and can be seen even before

the advent of television in the early research concerns about the influence of movies and comic books on children (Gunter, 1994; Lowery & DeFleur, 1988).

Attention to violence on television has been evident since the early 1950s (Gunter, 1994; Murray & Kippax, 1979). Among the more disturbing findings have been the consistent results showing that there are more instances of violent acts and situations in children's programming than on prime-time television (Condry & Scheibe, 1991; Huston, et al., 1992). During programming that is directed toward children, it has been found that there are an average of 25 acts of violence per hour, in 9 out of 10 programs (Condry & Scheibe, 1991). A 1992 study commissioned by TV Guide that looked at cable as well as network programming again found a high frequency of violence: 1,846 individual acts of violence in 180 hours of programming (10 channels over 18 hours). Cartoons, once again, were the most violent (*TV Guide*, 1992).

Considerably less attention, however, has been focused on the violent content of commercials aired during children's programming. Except for a study in 1979, where Schuetz & Sprafkin found that products were often presented in aggression-oriented contexts, little specific attention has been directed at violence in commercials. On the surface, this may seem reasonable when one considers a commercial's short duration in relation to program length. Nevertheless, because they are produced specifically to attract and to persuade a highly impressionable audience, violence in commercials has a potentially powerful impact. Furthermore, television executives specializing in children's programming have argued that sponsors wield substantial influence on content

in an attempt to create a need in the audience that their products will satisfy (President of DIC, National Council for Families & TV, 1993). Violence used as a persuasive tool in commercials may therefore point to the commercialization of violence as an intervening factor influencing the violent content in cartoons themselves. It is this deliberate goal to change attitudes about the desirability of certain products, services, and behaviors that points to the importance of identifying the extent to which violence appears as a persuasive tool in these commercials.

The purpose of this study was to examine the incidence of violence in children's advertising to complement investigations into violence in children's programming generally. It is our belief that the extensive exposure of children to advertising in terms of number of commercials broadcast, the repetitive nature of this exposure, and the persuasive intent of the ads makes it imperative to examine children's advertising relative to the question of media violence.

Background and Overview

Advertising

It has been said that television provides children with an "early window" on the world (Kunkel & Roberts, 1991). Because television in the United States operates as a commercial venture, this "early window" has also brought the nation's younger generation face-to-face with our system of private enterprise much sooner and to a much greater degree than ever before.

In 1982 the self-regulating code of the National Association of Broadcasters was rescinded, and in 1984 the FCC regulatory limit on ads

directed to children was lifted. Kunkel and Gantz (1992) found that the amount of advertising directed to children on television has been steadily increasing since 1984. The Children's Television Act of 1990, instituted because of concerns about the content of children's programming, set the limit for children's television commercials at 10.5 minutes/hour on week-ends, up from 9.5 minutes/hour under the earlier FCC regulation. As Kunkel and Gantz (1992) remark, the Act essentially legislated the observed increases in the amounts of advertising directed at children (this increase was apparently acceded to in exchange for "tacit support" of the industry for the Act. See Kunkel & Gantz, 1992, p. 148). Kunkel and Gantz (1992) emphasize the lack of oversight regarding advertising directed to children:

> With the demise of the NAB code, the only remaining layer of self-regulation is maintained by the advertising industry, which funds the Children's Advertising Review Unit of the National Council of Better Business Bureaus, Inc. CARU's activities are limited to reviewing a relatively small number of ads each year that have attracted complaints after they have aired; its efforts have been characterized as 'more symbolic than pragmatic' because of CARU's modest budget and resources and also because of the lack of any power to enforce its decisions. (p. 137)

It is estimated that the typical child viewer in 1980 was exposed to 20,000 commercials per year (Huston, et al., 1992; Kunkel & Roberts, 1991). After federal deregulation in 1984 this number has increased (Condry &

Scheibe, 1991; Kunkel & Gantz, 1992). In the current environment, the only real gatekeeper for ads broadcast to children is the individual station or cable company, and these have little say in advertising decisions made beyond the local level. Regulations regarding ads directed to children are limited to amount of advertising, deceptive advertising, and introductions to advertising that help children distinguish between ads and program content.

Some of the most extensive research on advertising the influence of advertising on children addresses a child's inability to make a perceptual distinction between programs and commercials. A 1977 study produced evidence indicating that most children below age 5 do not consistently recognize whether the content they are watching is a program or a commercial (Adler, et al.). Also, children are not necessarily able to recognize persuasive intent until around 7 to 9 years of age (Doubleday & Droege, 1993; Kunkel & Roberts, 1991). Common persuasive techniques are not understood until close to adolescence (Doubleday & Droege, 1993). Consistent with these findings, younger children tend to express greater belief in commercials and a display a higher frequency of purchase requests after viewing a commercial (until about age 8) (Huston, et al., 1992; Kunkel & Roberts, 1991). Not only do children display knowledge about products and request products advertised, but there is evidence that commercials have the potential to influence children's perceptions of sex-roles (Pingree, 1978).

Children do respond to commercials. After reviewing the literature on children's responses to advertising, Huston, et al. (1992) concluded:

> Studies of children's responses to commercials provide fairly strong evidence that children's information, knowledge, and preferences are affected. . . . Heavy viewing does not immunize children against commercial appeals nor does it help them to be more sophisticated about the persuasive intent of commercials (p.73-74).

Violence

The effect of television violence has upon viewers is by no means a settled question. There is substantial evidence that televised violence is related to aggression. For example, correlations have been established between viewing violence and aggressive behavior: heavy viewers behave more aggressively than light viewers. These correlations remain when corrected for other variables, including parenting styles. (Huston, et al., 1992; Singer, Singer, Rapaczynski, 1984). Nevertheless, the direction of causation is not clear (Gunter, 1994). Short-term increases in aggressive behavior have also been associated with previous viewing of aggressive television. What is not clear is whether this heightened aggressiveness "spills over into daily life" (Huston, et al., 1992). In general, it has been found that those children who display heightened aggression are those who were initially more aggressive (Gunter, 1994). It has also been argued that television violence can desensitize viewers to aggression. Children and adults exposed to television violence show less physiological arousal to violence in the "real" world. They are also less likely to help victims of violence (Gunter, 1994). Field studies have also

shown that there are increases in violent activities in a community after introduction of television. This finding has been found across cultures (Centerwall, 1992). Children have also been shown to imitate aggressive behaviors seen on television (Greenfield, et al., 1993; Gunter, 1994).

Children do not just learn anti-social behaviors or values that some consider questionable. It has been demonstrated that prosocial learning takes place. Kids who see programs such as *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood* have been shown to be more cooperative, more willing to share toys, and more willing to delay gratification than kids watching other programs (Friedrich & Stein, 1973). This learning does "spill over" into natural settings (Huston, et al., 1992; Murray and Kippax, 1979).

The general question of effects has also been addressed relative to gender stereotypes. It has been shown that children who are heavy television viewers display stronger gender stereotypes than children who read a lot. There have been generally consistent findings that exposure to television and the gender stereotypes therein are highly correlated with the gender stereotypes held by viewers (Huston, et al., 1992).

Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) make the argument that "ordering" is an "everyday reality-maintenance" need that television may help provide. Through providing information in a variety of forms, television has the capability of helping to create order in experience. Thus, messages on television have "the potential of being used in a more complex fashion in helping the person become better able to cope with new situations that might arise in the future." (p.7). In this sense, televised messages, including messages embedded within

commercials, provide a larger sense-making structure by which viewers might understand their world. The findings regarding violence, attitudes toward violence, gender stereotypes, and prosocial learning all support the notion that whether through the "drip" method of the "drench" method (Greenberg, 1988, cited in Huston et al., 1992), televised messages provide structures of meaning for audiences in which they may choose to participate. The factors influencing those choices are less clear.

In light of the potential effects of exposure to violent programming, and given the difficulty children have in distinguishing between the "reality" offered in a commercial and the probable nature of the product in actual performance, the question of violence used as a persuasive tool in commercials becomes even more important. Advertisers' persuasive strategies often focus not only upon the qualities of the product advertised, but upon the consumer's need for that product. To be successful, an advertisement must establish a need in the consuming audience: for example, if we want to have a good time, we need to drink the right kind of beer; if we want to have white clothes, we need to use Brand-X Bleach. The advertiser therefore not only has the task of convincing the consumer that the product will perform as demonstrated, but must also convince the consumer that the consequence of the product's use is also desired: the consumer must come to see him/herself as *wanting* those white clothes. Not only is the product cast in a desirable light, *but so too are the behaviors that create a need for that product.* By means of this strategy the advertiser sells the behavior to the consumer by showing that behavior to have desirable outcomes. Once this connection is established, it is only a short step

for the consumer to see him or herself as "needing" the product in order to successfully engage in the behavior. It is therefore crucial to the advertiser to make the consumer see the *behavior* as desirable, even necessary to effective daily functioning in the world. When considering violence in children's advertising, then, one must consider the implications of the incidences of violence in light of an intentional strategy to convince a young audience that the behaviors needed are not only desirable but that they are necessary if the child is to fulfill the ideal portrayed in the advertisement. Only then will the targeted audiences experience a need for the advertised product. The product in only important because it promises to help those children enact the desired behavior.

Television advertising exerts significant influence on children. There is substantial evidence that televised messages about violence interact with attitudes and is related to violent behavior exhibited by heavy viewers. Violence in advertising is therefore a combination that should create considerable concern.

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine the type and frequency of violent acts and situations in commercials broadcast during children's programming. The analysis was constructed to examine the various attributes in children's television commercials and will provide a "snapshot" of the nature of advertising directed to children on non-cable, commercial television in one Midwestern market.

Sample

Television commercials from four non-cable, commercial television stations that broadcast cartoons to the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area were used for this study. They are CBS (WCCO), ABC (KSTP), Independent (KMSP), and Fox (KITN). NBC did not broadcast children's cartoons during the time period studied.

Our sample included those cartoons that had the highest viewership among children. Using the February 1993 Nielsens, cartoons with a rating of "3" or higher (the highest rating was "9") were used in this study[1] resulting in a total of 21 cartoons (See Figure I). Saturday and weekday cartoons were taped during the week of June 7-12, 1993.[2] Sunday cartoons were taped July 18, 1993, having been omitted from the original sample due to technical problems.[3] The weeks chosen were not sweeps weeks; all programming was consistent with typical programming during the regular school year.

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[1] The February Nielsen ratings were the most recent available. To confirm ratings figures and to establish relative consistency of ratings over time we also used the May 1993 Rating Performance Grids prepared by a local television station. The choice of a rating of "3" was influenced both by desired sample size and by the fact that programs with a "3" or higher rating appear to be more enduring.

[2] Children were still in school during this week, in this market.

[3] Programming schedule for this week was the same as in the week of June 7.

Figure I

Ranking of Cartoons

1.	Garfield and Friends	CBS	Saturday
2.	Winnie the Pooh	ABC	Saturday
3.	Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles	CBS	Saturday
4.	Talespin	Independent	Sunday
5.	Tom & Jerry	Independent	Sunday
6.	Goof Troop	Independent	Weekday PM
7.	Conan	Independent	Sunday
8.	Raw Toonage	CBS	Saturday
9.	Rescue Rangers	Independent	Sunday
10.	X-Men	Fox	Saturday
11.	Darkwing Duck	ABC	Saturday
12.	King Arthur	Independent	Sunday
13.	Little Mermaid	CBS	Saturday
14.	Duck Tales	Independent	Weekday AM
15.	Ta.	Fox	Saturday
16.	Tiny Toons	Fox	Saturday
17.	Wizard of Oz	Independent	Sunday
18.	Dennis the Menace	Independent	Weekday AM
19.	Gulliver's Travels	Independent	Sunday
20.	Eek! The Cat	Fox	Saturday
21.	Batman-Animated	Fox	Weekday PM

Commercials aired during these cartoons were coded from the moment the program began to the moment the next program began. Two programs were one hour length (*Garfield and Friends* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*), and so commercials aired during the first half-hour of these programs were used, making program lengths equivalent. All commercials were coded, even if repeated. A total of 245 commercials were included for analysis.

Coding

All commercials were coded for the following attributes:

Cartoon violence. Each cartoon was categorized as *high-violence*, *medium-violence*, and *low-violence*. Data for this determination came from a study conducted at the same time, using these same cartoons (Broadwater, 1994). High-violence cartoons were those where the frequency of violent incidents was 0.5 standard deviation above the mean or higher for amount of violence in this sample of cartoons; low-violence cartoons were those where the frequency of violent incidents were 0.5 standard deviation below the mean or lower; medium-violence cartoons were all other cartoons.

Type of spot. All non-program spots were coded as *commercial*, the purpose of which is to sell a product or service; *PSA* (Public Service Announcement), a message intended to persuade, but not to sell a product; or *promotion*, for the station and/or future programming.

Nature of visual format. Commercials fell in one of three categories: *Animated/Fantasy*, where characters and setting are of cartoon-quality or clearly depicting make-believe events (such as dogs flying); *Non-animated*:

Human characters operating in a possible non-make-believe environment; or *Mixed,* a combination of the two classifications (such as human characters interacting with animated characters).

Type of product. Products and services were collapsed into five general groupings: Clothing, toys/games, consumables (such as candy, cereals, juices, soda pop), fast food and restaurants, and other (i.e. recreation parks, events, books, and movies).

Setting of commercial. Advertisements were coded according to the location in which they are depicted. Two categories were used to identify the setting of the commercials: *Home,* those that include the kitchen, bathroom, other room in house, and outdoors at home; and *Away,* including places such as restaurants, schools, and outdoors away from home.

Primary theme/appeal. All commercials were coded according to the primary theme or appeal using the four key categories described by Kunkel and Gantz (1992), somewhat modified: *fun/happiness*, *taste/flavor/smell*, *product-performance*, and *product-in-social-context*. The fun/happiness theme included commercials where the focus of attention is upon the positive emotional consequences of using the product. At the same time, the product itself is not described in any significant detail. For example, a pitch claiming that macaroni and cheese is "more fun than a bowl full of monkeys" would be a fun/happiness theme. Commercials showing kids smiling, laughing, and dancing around in a surreal context would also be coded as fun/happiness. Taste/flavor/smell includes appeals such as "tastes so good one taste is never enough," "tasty fruity flavors", or "a fruity part of a balanced breakfast." The product-

performance theme was coded when the primary focus of the ad was on the ways in which a product performed in use, or when the specific or unique qualities of a product-in-use were shown. The product-in-social-context theme was coded when the ad focused on the use of the product in a social situation and peer acceptance, social esteem, or status was associated with using the product.

Appeal to sex and age. The appeal of the commercials was coded as male, female, or "NA" if either the sex was unidentifiable or there was a general mix of the sexes in the commercial resulting in the inability to code the commercial's appeal as being either male or female. Age categories were 0-5 years of age, 6-9 years old, 10-14 years old, 15-19 years old, or 20 years old or older. Age appeal was determined based on the product or service advertised and the estimated age of the main characters in the ad that represented the target audience. These categorizations must be considered to be approximations.

Violence. Finally, the commercials were coded for violent content. For this study we used the definition offered by George Gerbner and the Annenberg group of researchers: violence is the "overt expression of physical force compelling action against one's will on pain of being hurt or killed or actually hurting or killing" (Gerbner, Gross, & Signorielli, 1980; Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, & Jackson-Beck, 1979). However, in addition we also coded proposed violence and reference to past violence. If no violence could be identified in a given commercial, then all subsequent coding attributes (to be

described) were considered not applicable. If some form of violence was identified in the commercials, the following attributes were also considered:

Overt violence. An ad was coded as containing overt violence if there was evidence of gunplay, use of weapons, isolated punches, pushing, dragging, biting, hitting, other simple assaults, or action that could cause physical harm.

Proposed violence. Meanings about violence are constructed through aural as well as visual means. Therefore, this attribute was coded "yes" if there were signs of verbal or nonverbal abuse or threats, or proposals of pending violence, for example, "Put your hands up or I'll shoot," or "Will Max get fried?" Also included in this category were menacing threats with a weapon, threatening gestures (such as a raised fist), attempts to incite fear, or symbolic representation of violence (e.g., breaking of a doll's arm to illustrate what could happen to you if you don't comply).

Other violence. Commercials were coded "yes" in this category if there was reference to past violence to influence others' future action (e.g., "He blasted you; now its your turn!"). Also include were all other types of violence that did not fall within the definitions described for overt violence or proposed violence. For instance, natural disasters, such as earthquakes, were counted in this category. Generally, the type of actions coded with a "yes" were those whose origin could not be traced to a specific earthly entity.[4]

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[4] We included natural disasters because of the short length of the scenario developed in ads, where plot development must take place in the span of 30-seconds. We opted

Alternatives to violence. When an ad was coded as containing violence, it was also coded for evidence of any alternative to violence being offered (e.g., problem-solving).

Sex of player doing action and sex of player receiving action. Whenever possible, the commercials exhibiting identifiable violence were coded for two additional categories, the sex of the player primarily taking action and the sex of the player primarily receiving action. If either the sex was unidentifiable or there was a general mix of the sexes in the commercial resulting in the inability to accurately code the commercial, this category was coded as "not specific".

Results

Of the 245 commercials included in this analysis, 46.1% (n=113) contained some form of identifiable violence. 33.5% (n=82) contained overt violence, and 37.1% (n=91) contained proposed violence. Of all spots, 86.1% (n=211) were commercials, 2.9% (n=7) were PSA's, and 11% (n=27) were promotions. In the following pages, the dominant patterns of violence in these commercials are described.

Violence in Ads Related to Violence in Cartoon Shows. There were no significant differences between the amount of violence in the cartoon and the number of ads broadcast during that cartoon that contain violence (X^2=.1293, df=2, p<.9374). This lack of relationship may be associated with a tendency for

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for a definition that would include this kind of destruction without requiring that the locus of intentionality be determined.

the high violence shows to have a smaller percentage of violent ads and the less violent shows to have greater percentage of violent ads. For example, 58.3 % of the ads on *Winnie the Pooh* were violent, a show that contained no violence (the only one). 45.5% of the ads on both *Goof Troop* and *The Little Mermaid*, two shows in the "low violence" category, were violent. 33.3% of the ads of *Chip 'n Dale Rescue Rangers*, a "high violence" show, were violent. On the highest violence show, *Batman Animated*, only 38.5% of the ads were violent. Mid-range violent shows contain violent ads ranging from 27.3% violent ads (*Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*) to 60% violent ads (*Wizard of Oz* and *Eek! the Cat*). This was not a consistent tendency across all cartoons, however, and no correlation, positive or negative existed.

Age and Violence. Most ads were directed to children 6-9 years old (60.4%, n=148). Of these, 46.6% were violent. Of the ads directed toward much younger children (1.2%, n=3), none were violent. Of the ads directed to 10-14 year olds (30.2%, n=74), 41.9% were violent. Only a small number of ads were directed to older audiences. Of the ads directed to 15-19 year olds (2%, n=5), only 20% were violent, but of those directed at 20 and up (2% , n=5) 60% were violent.

Day and Time Commercial Aired and Violence. No particular day was more or less violent that any other day, even when broken down by appeal. No particular time of day was more or less violent than any other time.

Format and Violence. There was some indication that animated fantasy was more likely to contain violence, but this was not a significant relationship (X^2=4.3998, df=2, p<.12).

Setting. There was no difference in violent content whether action in the commercial was set at home (34.5%) or away from home (34.1%).

Product and Violence. The highest frequency of ads was for consumables (n=116, or 47.3% of the total). Ads for toys and games accounted for 22% of the ads (n=54); fast foods accounted for 9% of the ads (n=-22); and "other" (including all promotions and PSA's) accounted for 21.6% of the ads (n=53).

There were no violent ads for fast foods. Of the violent ads, 25.7% were for *toys and games* (n=29), 37.2% were for *consumables* (n=42), 0% were for *fast foods*, and 37.2% were *"other"* (n=42). Of all toys/games ads, 53.7 % were violent; Of all consumables, 36.2% were violent; of all fast foods, 0% were violent; of all "other" ads, 79.2% were violent (X^2=48.07, df=3, p<.0001).

Of the violent ads, 86.2% (n=25) of the toys and games ad contained *overt violence*; 61.9% (n=26) of the consumables contained overt violence; and 73.8% (n=31) of "other" ads contained overt violence. (X2=5.14, df=2, p<.08). Of all toys and games ads 46.3% contained overt violence, comprising 30% of the total overt violence. Consumables contained overt violence 22.4% of the time, comprising 31.7% of the total overt violence. "Other" ads contained overt violence 58% of the time, comprising 37.8% of the total overt violence. (X^2=53.17, df=6, p<.0001).

Of all toys and games ads, 51.9% contained *proposed violence*, comprising 30.8% of the total. Consumables contained proposed violence 25% of the time (31.9% of the total); fast foods were not violent; "other" ads contained proposed violence 64.2% of the time, comprising 37.4% of the total

proposed violence. (X^2=56.38, df=6, p<.0001). Of violent ads, 96.6% of the toys and games ads, 69% of the consumables ads, and 81% of "other" ads contained proposed violence (X2=8.28, df=2, p<.02).

Primary Theme Appeal of Ad. Ads using the product performance theme were violent 61.5% of the time (n=65). While "other" appeals had a higher percentage (71.4%), there were only seven ads in this category. Ads using the taste/flavor/smell appeal were violent 43.8% of the time (n=48). Ads using the fun/happiness theme were violent 39.1% of the time (n=110). Ads using the product-in-social-context theme were violent 26.7% of the time (n=15) (X^2=12.602, df=4, p<.02).

Of the violent ads, the fun/happiness theme was used 38.1% of the time (n=43), the product performance theme was used 35.4% of the time (n=40), taste/flavor/smell was used 18.6% of the time (n=21), product-in-social-context was used 3.5% of the time (n=4), and other appeals were used 4.4% of the time (n=5) (X^2=12.602, df=4, p<.02).

Of the violent ads, toys and games used the "product performance" theme predominantly (75.9% of the time, n=22), followed by "fun and happiness" (17.2%, n=5). Consumables used "taste/flavor/smell" 50% of the time (n=21) , followed by "product performance" (16.7%, n=7). "Other" ads used "fun and happiness" 57.1% of the time (n=24), followed by "product performance" (26.2%, n=11).

Of *all* ads, most toys/games utilized the "product performance" appeal (74.1%, n=40); these were violent 55% of the time (n=22). "Fun and happiness" appeal was violent 41.7% of the time for toys and game (n=12). Of

all ads for consumables, 50% of the ads using the taste/flavor/smell appeal were violent (n=21). 33.3% of consumables ads using the fun/ happiness appeal were violent (n=14), and 16.7% of consumables ads using product performance (n=7) were violent. For ads using other appeals, the fun/happiness theme dominates, and is most likely to be violent (57.1%, n=24), followed by product performance (26.2%, n=11).

Of the violent ads, the "fun/happiness" ads were overtly violent 90.7% of the time (n=43), "product performance" ads 70% of the time (n=40), "taste" ads 47.6% of the time (n=21), "product in social context" ads 50% of the time (n=2), and "other" appeals 60% of the time (n=3).

Appeal to Gender. In all ads, when the primary sex appeal is to males (n=78), the ads were violent 64.1% of the time; to females (n=14), 7.1% of the time ads were violent (n=1); to both (n=153), 40.5% of the time (X^2=20.64, df=2, p<.0001).

In ads that contain violence, male characters are taking the violent action 56.6% of the time; female characters are identifiable as taking action 3.5% of the time. Gender of character was not identifiable, or action was taken by both male and female characters 39.8% of the time. There were no ads containing violence when gender of characters taking action could be identified where males were not violent .

In ads that contain violence that are directed toward males (n=50), 68% of the time males are the primary actors, 0% of the time females are primary actors, and 32% of the time gender of primary actor is not identifiable. (X^2=32.72, df=4, p<.0001).

In ads that contain violence, those characters receiving action are also predominantly male (47.8%, n=54). Female characters receive action 8.8% (n=10) of the time. Gender of characters receiving action was not identifiable or action was received by a mixed group in 43.4% (n=49) of the violent ads (X^2=17.86, df=4, p<.002).

Of the violent ads that appeal to males, males received action 50% of the time and 50% of the time gender could not be specified. Females did not receive action in these ads.

Of the violent ads that did not have a specific gender appeal, 46.8% (n=29) had males as the primarily recipients of action, 14.5% (n=9) had females as recipient, and 38.7% (n=24) could not be specified. (X2=17.86, df=4, p<.002).

There is more overt violence in ads directed to males (48.8%, n=40) or not specified (50%, n=41) than to females (1.2%, n=1) (X^2=23.76, df=4, p<.0001). Of violent ads directed to males, males were the recipients of action 46.3% of the time, females 0%.

Alternatives to Violence. Alternatives to violence are offered only four times (1.6% of the total number of ads). Each time, the appeal was not specific to gender. (X^2=24.55, df=4, p<.0001)

Discussion

The data described here affirms the claim that we need to attend to the violent content of the commercials being shown during children's programming. The results of this analysis indicate that, when viewed from almost any angle,

violence is prevalent during the commercials sponsoring children's television fare. The finding that nearly half of the commercials that are broadcast during children's cartoons contain a violent message, certainly suggests that there is need for closer examination.

Clearly, advertisers use displays of violent behavior to sell products to children. This is particularly true for advertising directed to boys, in particular toys and games for boys. For instance, commercials for action figures contained numerous instances of extremely brutal selling approaches. *Every* action figure commercial viewed showed signs of both overt and proposed violence, some more than others. As an example, the gruff voice-over for World Wrestling Federation™ action figures threatened its viewers with, "Buy it...or else!" Toy vehicles that can produce large sharp teeth and can growl, "Attack Pack"™, were promoted by extolling their ability to cause harm to each other when properly manipulated by the boys playing with them. A commercial for "Super Mario"™ action figures depicts the figures shooting weapons at one another (with the help of real boys [as distinct from cartoon-animation boys]) and weapons used to punch other action figures in the face. This commercial ends with a real boy slamming doors on the head of a life-size action figure, which falls down in a pretend daze. "But don't worry," intones the boy, "they're not real." While one commercial touted the benefits of being a "Lego-Maniac"™ and showed a boy creating a weapon built with Legos™ than can destroy a space invader, another resembled a violent college anatomy course: the entrails of a Jurassic Park™ action figure spill out of its snap-off belly when attacked by another dinosaur.

Most of the commercials in our sample were targeted specifically at young boys. Of those commercials, nearly two-thirds were designed specifically to appeal to boys between the ages of 6 and 9 . Those commercials directed to a slightly older audience were almost as violent. Young children are being inundated with images of violent boys in 64% of the commercials directed to boys that they watch. Boys in this commercial world are clearly supposed to be violent.

It should be noted that these results reflect a predominance of male actors in the ads generally, a finding consistent with past research (Burkhart, 1989; Condry & Scheibe, 1991; Macklin & Kolbe, 1984). Nevertheless, the gender distinctions here are striking. In *none* of the ads that contained violence where gender of the characters could be identified were males not violent. In the violent ads, males were the primary actors and recipients of the action in the ad. Again, this reflects, in part, the dominance of males in ads generally. However, the lopsidedness of male gender identification with violence demonstrated here indicates an emphasis upon this specific aspect of the male stereotype. *The connection between violence and maleness is firmly reinforced in children ads.*

It is often asserted that boys are naturally drawn to aggressive or violent stories and images. Producers, in particular, may argue that dramatic action requires violence if is to be attractive to the audience that must be attracted by commercial television (National Council for Families & TV, 1993). From this perspective it is only "natural" that violence be used to appeal to male audiences. This argument, however, is not upheld by research. Alvarez, Huston, Wright & Kerkman (1988) found that girls and boys (5 - 7 years old)

attend differently to television, with boys paying more attention than girls to all cartoons, whether high or low levels of action, *or high or low levels of violence*. Girls, on the other hand, attended to low action rather than high action programs, regardless of violence level. Violence is not required for attention. It should be noted, however, that it has also been found that boys *enjoy* media products that contain violence more than girls do. Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi (1990) found that boys experience VCR viewing, video games, and music videos as more enjoyable than do girls. The sex differences were greatest with video games and music videos, both of which have been shown in other studies utilize violent as well as sexist scenarios (Dominick 1984; Sherman & Dominick, 1986).[5] While violence is not required for attention, the enjoyment of violence by males seems to be firmly established by adolescence.

The "product performance" appeal was the theme most likely to be violent, seen largely in commercials for toys and games. Most of these ads were directed toward male audiences as well. In these commercials violence appears to be reinforced as a way to accomplish an objective: this toy or game will perform (violently) so the child can pursue *his* objective. Violence is clearly embedded as an appropriate vehicle in this orientation toward achievement. The young male viewer is being sold the ways in which the product will fulfill a

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[5] The sex differences found in our study are generally consistent with those found by Sherman and Dominick (1986) in videos broadcast in 1984. It should be noted that videos are also a product of the advertising industry.

violent purpose, rather than the non-violent pleasure the product may have the potential of providing.

Not only is violence a way to achieve objectives in ads directed to children, it is also a way to have lots of fun. The "fun/happiness" theme was used over a third of the time in violent ads. The association between violence and fun and happiness is especially disturbing. In light of a world where "wilding" is a reality, justified because it is "fun," this connection in ads directed to children gives one pause.[6]

It is surprising the extent to which food products use violence as a theme. While the Hawaiian Punch™ ads were not violent (a departure from past practice), several other food ads, notably cereal ads, contained violent characteristics. A common theme was that of theft, where yummy scrumptious cereal was stolen by bad guys. Recovering the food often required violence (e.g., bonking the bad guy over the head; a dog chasing the bad guy and biting his rear end with large pointy teeth). Sometimes the trademark "hero" was plotting and acting to steal the cereal away from the rightful eater (e.g., stalking; zapping the other so s/he drops the cereal box and it falls into the "hero's" hands). In the ads we reviewed, this trademark character was successful, encountering no negative sanctions for this behavior.

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[6] "Wilding" is an American term referring to the activity where groups of individuals set out to beat-up, rape, and/or kill someone--anyone--just for the fun of it.

Even pitches for potentially educational entities were not immune from violent themes. For example, an upcoming film at the Science Museum of Minnesota (Sharks) employed violent advertising strategies. As a large shark swam near a caged diver, the announcer enticed the viewer with images of "filet of diver," "diver burger," and "diver under glass." This seemingly innocent narration smacks of an inarguable premise that the potential of violence is attractive and should be sought.

In children's ads violence is an extremely useful activity, helping a child achieve several different goals. The fact that violence appears in several different appeals functions as a corroborative message: violence will work in all sorts of ways to accomplish all sorts of goals.

The "other" category for types of ads contained mixed types of messages about violence. Most public service announcements (PSAs) did, unexpectedly, contain examples of violence. For example, one sponsored by the American Humane Society, "The Adventures of Dynamo Duck," showed actual animals acting out a story line in which the heroes and villains plot against each other, destroy (by implication) each other, make references to planning "attacks, " and make threats to do something to each other if they don't comply with the demanded behavior. The point of it all? The narrator concludes with, "Be good to animals. The planet we save just may be your own." Weasels and cats, the villains subjected to the wiles of the baby duck, are apparently exempted from this admonition.

The messages in PSA's were primarily prosocial messages. Often references to violence were used to illustrate the negative consequences for

failing to obey common sense rules. For instance, children were warned that "you could die" if you don't equip your smoke detectors with fresh batteries. In another PSA, children are taught about racial diversity through the offering of examples of unacceptable behavior and language which lead to prejudiced thinking. The main difference between using violence in this instance in comparison to all other commercials, is that the ultimate goal was not to sell a product, but rather to modify the viewer's thinking and behavior to promote safety or mold prosocial attitudes. The incidence of violent content in PSA's would argue that there is a belief that violence is an appropriate selling tool, even for prosocial messages, and that we as a public are desensitized enough so that we do not question the desirability of depicting, for example, a shark researcher as potentially dead meat.

One of the most disturbing findings pertains to the virtual inability of a child watching any cartoons to escape extensive exposure to violence via commercials. The lack of a correlation between violent cartoons and violent commercials bears grim witness to the futility experienced by a parent trying to protect a child from violent television by carefully allowing the child to view only nonviolent cartoons. Since a viewer has almost an equal chance of being exposed to a violent commercial during a high-violence cartoon as during a low-violence cartoon, even children in households that carefully monitor viewing will be exposed to messages persuading them that violence is desirable.

As noted above, most ads were judged to be directed to children 6-9 years old, and of these nearly half contained violence. While the ads that contained the most violence were not directed at the youngest age group (recall

that only three ads were judged to be directed at children younger than six years old), the ages of the children shown in these ads are those to which a five or six-year old aspires. These are the same children who have been shown to use ads as an information source for understanding society around them, and, potentially, for models of appropriate behavior (Doubleday & Droege, 1993). In light of the potential influence of advertising on the development of cultural ideas (Doubleday & Droege, 1993; Huston, et al., 1992), these results raise serious questions about the dominance of messages about violence that are directed repeatedly and incessantly at children known to be at an age of high impressionability.

Implications

Many American viewers are calling for a reduction in TV violence and are asking that tighter controls to be placed on the networks regarding violent television programs. The concern about violence on television has resulted in legislative investigations and proposals for regulating broadcast television ("Simon gives TV 60 days", 1993). Thus far, however, discussion of regulation has focused on program content, not on content of commercials. It is clear from this study that any policy action must also address commercials and should address the relationship between advertisers and content of children's programs. The commercial text/intertext relationship is an integral part of understanding the evolution of content (Meehan, 1991).

It is also necessary to look at what we define as "violence" in any attempts to regulate it. Just counting the number of instances of violence and

asserting that these are bad is not enough. One must ask about the meaningful context within which the violence takes place: is a PSA that contains violence in order to warn about smoke detectors that don't work to be viewed with the same alarm as a commercial showing a trademark hero stalking an unsuspecting character who happens to be carrying the coveted cereal?

Furthermore, our concern should not be with one message broadcast in any one particular commercial. Rather, we should be concerned about the contextual meanings embedded in these commercials as well as the sheer volume of messages that focus in some way around violence. The multiplicity of messages, from many sources, dealing with many products, and utilizing several different appeals produce a corroborative effect potentially reinforcing the belief that a value on violence as a first and only response is appropriate.

The lack of alternative messages, i.e., that there are other ways to achieve fun and happiness and prove product performance without reference to violence, is also a concern. One can prove potency, one can believe oneself to be powerful, and one can show competence in ways that are not violent--but not in the world if children's television advertising. The power in self-control, in problem-solving, in collaboration, in achieving objectives jointly without having to overcome an opponent, in individual self-satisfaction in a job well done--these messages are nonexistent.

We must look at the use of violence in children's ads in the context of the system of images wherein they exist. Duane Cady has argued that our culture is a culture of warism (Cady, 1989). Our results show that the advertising on television that is directed to our children reflects and reinforces

this culture. Television is a powerful teaching tool, but as any teacher can tell you, not all of what it taught is learned or accepted. In addressing television and violent we must consider the messages in cultural context. We must also look at that messages that are not there, and the ways in which we participate in their exclusion. We must confront our cultural predisposition to view violent action as *the only* truly ethical response to injustice the questioning of which is a sure sign of weakness.

We will do nothing about violence in ads for children until we confront our cultural predisposition to embrace violence. It is clear from our results that, at least in television ads, we are socializing our boys to be violent. We are not only telling them, we are persuading them that violence is fun. It is productive. *It is what boys are*. We must come to understand why it is so important to us as a culture that our men equate violence with competence and with happiness. Violence in context demands--and reveals--moral stance. When we accept the challenge to examine the arguments we are embracing about violence through media messages, we will necessarily confront the ethical nature of our moral universe.

We believe television teaches a curriculum. We cannot predict with accuracy what children will learn from any given curriculum, as any teacher will attest. There are extensive arguments about how to facilitate learning in schools because we have not settled questions about how children learn nor why children learn different things from the same curriculum. We have been trying for over two thousand years to determine how persuasion works, and why it doesn't work. We know that simply exposure to a message does not mean

that message will have an effect, nor that the message will have a predictable effect.

We don't know what an individual child will learn by repeated exposure to ads that are violent. That does not mean, however, that we should not be concerned. Just as we care about the curriculum in schools, even though we don't know exactly how it will affect an individual child, we ought to care about the curriculum embedded in television ads directed to children.

Television is like any curriculum: the curriculum reflects what we value. With television, we have a window into our cultural soul. Until we understand that, we will do little to change what we are providing for our children to learn. Television images and messages do not exist in a vacuum. They must be understood within the system of images that is our culture. Television images, including ads, take their meaning in relationship to the system within which they function. We must look at the arguments we are making to ourselves about the proper role of violence in our society and in our world. We must look at the struggle about violence that is portrayed, and at what we may vicariously learn about the consequences of the choices we make about being violent.

We have established that violence in children's ads is a serious issue. We have not established what that violence means. For t[illegible] reason the research reported here is only a beginning and must be viewed as limited. The contextual meaning of these images should be examined. Nevertheless, when one considers the sheer amount of time that violence is the focus of commercial attention, regardless of context, the potential ramifications are disturbing.

Conclusion

Research regarding television violence and television advertising points to the importance of attending to violence in commercials. If action is taken to regulate programming, commercials ought not be exempt. The research described here only begins to examine this very serious issue. Beyond this basic analysis, a more extensive treatment and closer, more detailed examination should be undertaken.

One advertising executive once stated, "Sooner or later you must look through kids' goggles and see things as they see them, appeal to them through their childish emotions and meet them on their own ground" (Mahaney, 1969). Likewise, sooner or later we must put on the goggles that advertisers are wearing and look at what they see when they are pretending to be our children. It will tell us who advertisers would have our children become.

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